

The Oregon Observer

Thursday, August 23, 2001

Baldwin hears concerns, shares views in Oregon

By Bill Livick

Unified Newspaper Group

Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin visited with a handful of Oregonians at Village Hall Friday, Aug. 17, fielding questions ranging from veterans' affairs to school funding to her support for a national system of universal health care.

The second district representative, who serves on the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary and Budget Committees, was thanked by several people for her work in keeping the Veterans Administration (VA) hospital in Madison open.

In April, 1998, the government's General Accounting Office (GAO) released a report suggesting that closing some VA hospitals would save millions of dollars and could "enhance services." An ensuing Veterans' Affairs Committee study proposed nine options for streamlining VA hospitals, one that proposed closing the Madison VA Hospital.

"We were definitely caught off guard by that and were very concerned, because after years of thinking that they weren't considering any closings in this area, we realized that they were," Baldwin said. "I was on a committee that came up with three recommendations to keep services at the hospital going. The Veterans Administration went with our recommendation that they keep the VA Hospital open in Madison, with 75 additional beds from the Tomah facility."

Baldwin added she's been "encouraging a study of veterans' health issues, such as agent orange and Gulf War syndrome."

Oregon resident Lorraine Kopke asked Baldwin about the high rate of state taxation on veterans' pensions. Kopke said her son, a retired veteran, had chosen to live in Illinois because of Wisconsin's tax rate. "I understand Wisconsin is one of the few states that taxes pensions," she said.

Baldwin responded that there's little she could do at the federal level to affect the state's tax code, and she doubted the state would repeal the tax under its current fiscal climate.

Oregon High School special education teacher Kristine Guderyon-Goetz raised the issue of public school funding. While she acknowledged that the Oregon School District is in good shape, she cited the case of a school in Westby, Wis., where recent news reports say facilities are inadequate to meet students' basic needs.

"They're sitting outside for art and music, and that's a sin in 2001," Guderyon-Goetz said. "How can we make school funding more equal?"

"As you know, the federal government has a fairly small role in local education, and probably most people in Wisconsin ... think that's good," Baldwin said. "I think one of the ways in which the federal government can be helpful and not a hindrance to local school districts is in supporting them in the areas where it's most difficult to raise funds."

"Two of those areas are special education and the modernization of buildings," she said. "I would like to see us (the federal government) stick to a commitment we made on funding 40 percent of special education needs — we're at about seven percent — and a commitment to allowing for low-interest federally subsidized loans to make it easier for local districts to be able to afford to improve their schools."

Joe Sullivan, a community outreach worker for Dane County Human Services, talked about the Oregon Youth Center and its difficulty in procuring an operating budget. "It costs about \$40,000 a year to run any moderately sized youth center. It's quite a struggle for centers in smaller towns to find that kind of money," Sullivan said. "The amount that you got for the New Loft (\$750,000) ... would fund all 11 Dane County youth centers for two years. I'm wondering if you know about any other funding that these groups could tap in to?"

The second-term representative said she's been "trying to figure out what federal grants are available"

Please turn to BALDWIN, page 2

BALDWIN

AUG 23 2001

Continued from page 1

for local projects.

"It's vast," she said. "We're trying to do a better job of understanding what's out there."

The discussion then turned to health care. Responding to a question about a Patients' Bill of Rights, Baldwin said: "The Senate passed a fairly strong Patients' Bill of Rights; the House passed a weaker version that President Bush said he would sign. I do not feel the enforcement provisions are adequate to protect those rights" in the House's bill.

"Texas is the model," she said. "They passed a very strong Patients' Bill of Rights."

Baldwin said opponents of the bill argue that such legislation would cause an avalanche of law suits against health maintenance organizations, but since the Texas bill was adopted, there have been only 17 law suits, "none out of line."

Addressing one of her strongest goals, Baldwin made the case for a system of universal health care in the United States. She called 43-million Americans without health insurance a "staggering number," and compared the nation's commitment to public education to its attitude on health care.

"In this country, and in this state in particular, we made a decision at the time of its founding that every child deserves the opportunity for an education," Baldwin said. "And we decided that should be free to the child and the family, supported by taxes, so there wasn't a tuition and we didn't have it where only elite children received an education."

"Why did we do that? I don't know that it was just pure benevolence," she said. "We realized that if we had an educated citizenry, we'd have a better democracy."



Tammy Baldwin receives a bouquet of flowers from Oregon resident Loraine Kopke at her August 17 Listening Session.

Bill Livick photo

"I don't understand why we've never come to the same conclusion about basic health. It's hard to understand why we don't see the community benefit to a universal system."

Baldwin is co-author, along with Congressman David Obey of Wisconsin, of the Health Security for All Americans Act, legislation that would reach the goal of health care coverage for all by allowing states to decide for themselves how to provide quality, affordable and comprehensive coverage for all residents while providing broad federal guidelines and financial assistance.

"I think it's unconscionable that in our country, almost 43-million Americans have no health coverage at all," said Baldwin. "We know that if 43-million uninsured people found their political voice tomorrow and spoke as one and demanded universal health care, we would have it."